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Project FOCUS: Supporting Military Families Worldwide

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It's always been said – “military families serve too” – they feel the effects of multiple and combat related deployments and they bare witness to the impact of high operational tempo. Since 2008 – Navy Medicine has been not only serving the service members needs, but the psychological health needs of families as well. The U.S. Navy Bureau of Medicine and Surgery (BUMED) answered the call with [Project FOCUS \(Families Over Coming Under Stress\)](#) which is a skill building resiliency training prevention program designed to address difficulties that military families may experience when facing the challenges of operational deployments, combat stress and/or injuries such as post traumatic stress reactions, substance abuse and suicide. FOCUS uses family level techniques to highlight areas of strength and resilience and identify areas in need of growth and change to contend with current difficulties. Throughout the intervention, structured activities bridge the gaps in communication among family members that often follow highly stressful experiences.

In 2008, BUMED implemented the FOCUS Project for U.S. Navy and Marine Corps families in order to address the impact of multiple deployments, combat stress, and high operational tempo on children and families.

FOCUS is grounded in empirical evidence demonstrating that family centered interventions that enhance parenting and parent-child relationships for highly stressed families (families affected by war, parental depression, and serious medical illness/loss) promote increased understanding, positive emotional adjustment, and positive developmental outcomes in children and parents. Caregiver-child relationships serve as scaffolds for building adaptive skills of emotional and behavioral regulation. Interventions that develop adaptive skills and behaviors in families—particularly those that support parent-child communication, skills in parent-child bonding, and effective family management– have been shown to reduce and prevent problem behaviors and emotional distress in children.

There is increasing awareness that military children and families are significantly affected by a parent’s combat-related mental health problems and physical injuries, as well as the wear and tear of multiple wartime deployment cycles. Given that approximately forty percent of

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U.S. service members are parents, a large number of military children and families are at risk and may benefit from targeted preventive services.

Specific high-risk groups include parents with active symptoms related to post traumatic stress or other combat-related mental health conditions. Research has demonstrated that these difficulties can interfere with parenting, family functioning, and child adjustment across a range of contexts. Another high-risk group of children and families are those of the over 31,000 Soldiers, Sailors, Marines, and Airmen who have been injured in Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom. Combat Operational Stress injuries, whether psychological or physical, in a military parent are likely to disrupt family roles, sources of care, and instrumental support. In addition, more than one out of three military personnel who have been killed in the Iraq/Afghanistan wars have been parents, most with children younger than 10 years of age. These factors underscore the urgent national public health need to provide family-centered, evidence-based prevention services to military children and families who have been affected by multiple wartime separations, parental combat-related mental health problems, and parental physical injury.

FOCUS has demonstrated that a family centered targeted prevention program is feasible and effective for military families. Utilizing national and local partnerships, community outreach, and flexible and family friendly skills based approach, FOCUS has successfully initiated a resiliency training program in collaboration with the military community. FOCUS has demonstrated that a strength based approach to building child and family resiliency skills is well received by service members and their family members reflected in high satisfaction ratings. Notably, program participation has resulted in significant *increases* in family and child positive coping and significant *reductions* in parent and child distress over time, suggesting longer term benefits for military family wellness.

Project FOCUS's approach to increasing resiliency, and preventing negative outcomes such as substance abuse has lead to increased psychological health, family cohesiveness and overall improved functioning.

Since opening our doors in 2008, we have grown from seven locations to over 23 locations world-wide. BUMED'S FOCUS program has served over 340,000 families, service members, community providers, medical personnel and chaplains. FOCUS serves families both at the installation level in a face-to-face manner, but also through a telehealth application – through our virtual reality adaptation – [FOCUS World](#) – in which a family can receive virtual services of the program. FOCUS serves not only the Navy, and Marine Corps, but also the Air Force and the Army...anytime...anywhere.

For Project FOCUS resources click [here](#).

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